

## AN ESSAY ON KABBALISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on the transcription of the lecture “Introdução ao pensamento de Abraham Cohen de Herrera” (“Introduction to the thinking of Abraham Cohen de Herrera”), given at the II SinaCripto, at UFS/São Cristóvão-Brazil between the 19th and the 21st of June, 2017. Our original aim was to discuss some features of Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s *Puerta del Cielo* (c. 1570 – c. 1635); but, as soon as we started looking for secondary bibliography, we have noted that there are many issues surrounding, as a background, the production of Herrera’s above mentioned work. On the other hand, some of these issues – as, for example, the strict endogeny of Kabbalah, the transmission of Jewish Mystic Literature, the oblivion of Jewish philosophers in the narratives of the history of philosophy – do not concern only to Herrera’s works and life, but can be found in other instances related to the History of the Jewish Thought. So, we changed our original focus and, instead of talking only on Herrera’s work, we tried to trace back the origins and perenniality of those above mentioned issues.

**Keywords:** History of Jewish Thought. Metahistory of Philosophy. Jewish Mysticism. Kabbalah. Abraham Cohen de Herrera.

**Resumen:** Este artículo se basa en la transcripción de la conferencia " Introdução ao pensamento de Abraham Cohen de Herrera " ("Introducción al pensamiento de Abraham Cohen de Herrera"), impartida en la II SinaCripto, en UFS / São Cristóvão-Brasil entre 19 y 21 de junio de 2017. Nuestro objetivo original era discutir algunas características de la *Puerta del Cielo* de Abraham Cohen de Herrera (c. 1570 - c. 1635); pero, tan pronto como comenzamos a buscar bibliografía secundaria, hemos notado que hay muchos problemas relacionados, como antecedentes, con la producción del trabajo antes mencionado de Herrera. Por otro lado, algunos de estos temas – como, por ejemplo, la estricta endogenia de la Cabalá, la transmisión de la literatura mística judía, el olvido de los filósofos judíos en las narrativas de la historia de la filosofía – no se refieren solo a las obras y vida de Herrera, pero se pueden encontrar en otros casos relacionados con la historia del pensamiento judío. Entonces, cambiamos nuestro enfoque original y, en lugar de hablar solo sobre el trabajo de Herrera, tratamos de rastrear los orígenes y la perennidad de los problemas mencionados anteriormente.

**Palabras clave:** Historia del pensamiento judío. Metahistoria de la filosofía. Misticismo judío Kábala. Abraham Cohen de Herrera.

*E aunque nace tu alegría  
viendo a tantos perecer,  
sia a muchos lo hiciste ver,  
también has de ver tu día.*

*a nau aportará um dia neste cais  
vazio sempre mas jamais de  
passageiros  
todos à espera desse algum por  
tudo incerto*

*Si nuestro pecado obliga  
a sufrir tanto rigor,  
considera que el Señor,  
si dissimula, castiga.*

*Si parece que se olvida  
de castigar su enemigo,  
es sólo porque el castigo  
há de ser más que em la vida.*

*Si tu arrogancia te alaba  
del mal de tantos, advierte,  
que así comienza tu muerte  
y al outro em ella se acaba.*

(João Pinto Delgado, *A la salida de Lisboa*, circa 1620).

*tanto a partida qual também toda  
chegada  
seja amsterdã quem sabe  
hamburgo ou mesmo o bósforo*

*ainda Recife pode ser  
constantinopla  
onde seremos por demais talvez  
em rhodes  
faremos lá a nossa língua e outras  
folhagens*

(Moacir Amâncio, *Matula*, 2017, p.23).

## 1 Preliminary observations

This paper is based on the transcription of the talk “Introdução ao pensamento de Abraham Cohen de Herrera” (“Introduction to the thinking of Abraham Cohen de Herrera”), given at the II SinaCripto, at UFS/São Cristóvão-Brazil between the 19th and the 21st of June, 2017. It was transcribed by Karina Nunes dos Santos (PPGFilosofia-UFS/São Cristóvão, Brazil) and Marcos Roberto Santos Pereira (PPGMetafísica-UnB/Brasília, Brazil), to whom I am very thankful. So, it is unavoidable that some features of the language as it is spoken, instead of written, appear here. But I tried to turn this paper less informal, giving to it a little bit of the features which characterize a proper paper. On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that, as it was originally designed to be a talk, I’ve voluntarily kept some aspects that show the fluidity of a talk.

It is also important to note that by the time I gave the original lecture, my aim was to talk about Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s *Puerta del Cielo*. But, as soon as I started researching the secondary bibliography on the issues that surround and embrace Herrera’s works and life, I’ve seen that the knowledge that I had by that time could be compared to a glance at the tip of an iceberg. Thus I had to change my talk to make that maze of otherwise invisible issues clear for the audience, changing my approach.

## 2 The talk

For you to understand a little better how the stuff works, my main research is on Ancient Scepticisms, notably the Pyrrhonic one, whose main exponent is Sextus Empiricus, a doctor from the 2nd/3rd century A.D. He wrote a vast work that survived (and surviving is an exceptional deed to the works of the time). He wrote in Greek and one of the missions of whoever works with this author – the way I see it – is to translate his texts. That’s what I’ve been doing since 2011. The relevance of this is that there are no texts of this author translated to Portuguese, even though he’s one of the most influential philosophers, whose literature is foundational to that which we call “Modern crisis” in philosophy or in Modern Philosophy, because

the main Modern authors that questioned the Medieval tradition and tried to structure a new way of knowing have read Sextus Empiricus.

So, if we think about the ten most important works of philosophy, there maybe will be the *Essays* by Montaigne, a book by Hume (*Treatise or Enquiry*), the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Kant, something from Spinoza and Descartes, the *Meditations*, evidently. They probably were all readers of Sextus Empiricus, or at least they suffered the impact of ancient Skeptical literature. So, all my academic research started with this author, Sextus Empiricus.

In a given moment of that researching activity, I thought that it was necessary to get in touch with those other philosophies with which Sextus used to dialogue. The most important of them all, to him and to the dialogue, was the Stoicism, which became, since its foundation, some kind of perennial philosophy, spreading over lots of other philosophies.

Then, at that moment of my research, I realized that I should have some sort of additional support about the philosophy of the Stoics, which was severely criticized by Sextus. At this moment, then, it came into my mind that, actually, it was lacking in my research not only not comprehend the philosophies with which skepticism dialogued, but also the very context of the dialogue.

This context is the Hellenistic period, some sort of prelude to the end of Antiquity, going from the 4th century B.C. until the suicide of Cleopatra, in the year 30 of the first century before Christ. Then, indeed, Egypt becomes Rome's province, then we are headed to the period of the Late Antiquity. In this way, I specialized even more in the philosophies of this Hellenistic period and in the debates between them, just as in matters of history of ideas.

Among the authors of the context and of the period are figures that are very important to that which would be the transmission of Greek philosophy – to the transmission of the pagan thought –, to the great cultures of the Book, the religions of the Book, that would be the Judaism and the Christianity, and, much later on, six centuries after Christianity, the Islam.

Philo of Alexandria is who is going to do this mediation between the thinking of the pagans, notably Platonism, and Judaism. Another thing that's very interesting about him is that he was from a notable family in Alexandria, he wrote a vast work, nevertheless, he was not much read by the Jews of his time. The reason for this is still a motive of speculation. There is not an unequivocal thing in philosophy. Philosophy is the domain of suspicion, and when the suspicion ends in philosophy, philosophy ends. But some reasons that specialists, as for instance Francesca Calabi, point to are that: Philo would have employed some method of interpreting the Torah that caused some sort of aversion to the more traditional Jews in Alexandria.

This method is the allegorical method that the Christians, notably Augustine, will use afterwards in order to interpret their writings. But, beyond this, the thing is that Philo, in using this allegorical method, will use conceptual keys that are from Pagan Philosophy, and then we have another problem for the more traditional Judaism. That would be the problem of a more or less frequent interaction between Paganism and Judaism, present in the use of an allegorical method that is not consistent with a more literal approach to the Torah.

Anyway, Philo became very influential on the Christians. Then arose, in Alexandria, a Catechetical School, contemporary to him, at the end of his life, the Catechetical School of Alexandria, that is going to use various methods for the interpretation of the Bible that were borrowed from Philo.

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At this moment, that are two agendas, two projects of this Catechetical School of Alexandria: one of them is to consolidate a Christian community in Alexandria, the other is to consolidate a Christian community in Alexandria composed not only of scholars, thus they had an agenda of conversion and defense of the Christian faith. But to do that, as they spoke to Pagans, they needed to use even more Pagan concepts, symbols, myths, and philosophy's argumentative structure. In short, they needed to talk like Pagans. At this moment, philosophy's infiltration in the newborn Christianity is irreversible, and notably the Platonism will do this infiltration.

Well, that's a long history. I was supposed to be talking about Abraham Cohen de Herrera, who passed away in the 17th century. But I am talking about Philo, born in the 1st century B.C. and passed away in 1st century A.D. But Philo is very important in the literary context of Abraham Cohen de Herrera, why? Abraham Cohen de Herrera, even though he's an author of the 17th century, is still submerged in a Renaissance intellectual context. He was not a Modern. And Philo was one of the favorite authors of the Renaissance.

I'll leave this stored for a while, it's a block of thought that is going to be evoked later on, and there are lots of blocks of thought to be used for structuring a presentation on the issues involved, as a background, in Herrera's life and thought.

Now, another remarkable thing – and now another block of thought – about the Hellenistic Philosophy is its almost complete absence in the philosophy courses and in the specialized literature. There are, for example, very little stuff in Brazilian Portuguese. Why? That's my point. Because from the 18th century, when we see rising, as some sort of inheritance from the Enlightenment, the Encyclopedism and, then, the History of Philosophy, in the 19th century, we have a choice made in there, in that context, about what had and didn't have to be read...

And the Hellenistic Philosophy appears as a declining philosophy because it isn't produced in the Classical period, of the Greek Miracle and the Athenian Democracy. The "Greek Miracle thesis" is that everything good that happened in the Greek Philosophy only happened because of or while the Greeks were isolated from the other cultures. This argument becomes antisemitic with time.

For example, the Hellenistic period, before it, what do we have? The Classical period. Who is in the Classical Period? Plato and Aristotle, for instance. Plato, Athenian, citizen, autochthon, who defended the regimen of the *Republic*, with the guardians and etc... And that will indirectly inspire, in the future, the official program of the Nazi Party, to produce "guardians in the most elevated Platonic sense", unfortunately.

Aristotle wasn't an autochthon Athenian, but he was Greek. But, for example, Zeno of Citium, founder of Stoicism, was Semitic; he was a Phoenician, the Biblical Canaanites. But Zeno inaugurates a philosophy that, even though is perennial, was seen as a philosophy of decadence, because it isn't autochthon. Another thinker whose history offers a sample of this pattern of anti-Semitism is Pherecydes of Syros, who probably wrote one of the first books in prose of the Greek culture and, maybe, of the entire Western history. He was one of the first thinkers to naturalize nature. He wrote a *Theogony*, a Cosmogony in which the elements that appear are natural. He isn't even taken into account in the books of history of philosophy, with some exceptions.

Almost nobody talks about Pherecydes, Phoenician, whose dating is uncertain, but might well be a younger contemporary of Thales. In the end, this "historical" snipping, that qualifies some philosophies as "declining" (and others, by antithesis, as "arising"), it will always select as apogee, golden age, or glory, that which is

related to the Greek autochthony. The other authors that don't fit in this typology, even if they were there, having dialogues, they'd be excluded. This is my third block of thought.

The fourth block is the following: this exclusion that permeates the history of philosophy, or even, the history of the history of philosophy, it doesn't restrict itself only to the Antiquity, for it focuses on Renaissance, Modern and even Contemporary thinkers. Nearly no one studies Martin Buber anymore, for example, in University. Nearly no one studies Abraham Cohen de Herrera, thinker of the 17th century. Now, what about in the Middle Ages? Who studies Maimonides? Almost no one.

There exists some sort of prejudice that causes the irreversible harm of working as if it was a cauterization in living parts of the history of philosophy, tissues of the history of philosophy turn out having nodes that are cauterized thanks to a prejudice. So, these terminations, junctions, thought chains, they're completely erased.

Well, in the 19th century we see something called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* emerging, which is the Science of Judaism. This Science appears in Germany and, simply, tries to comprehend, from a perspective that is initially rationalist and heir of the Enlightenment, questions of the Jewish world, in the broad sense, but exempt of the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah still was, there, seen as some sort of indomitable terrain. Why? Because the Science of Judaism did not conceive a place for something that was had as obscure: Kabbalah, obscure thing, occultism, theurgy and irrationalism, in the best of hypothesis, irrationalism.

We have a deficit in there. And, despite the gain of the arising of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the deficit persists, which is the prejudice regarding the Kabbalah. At the end of the 19th century this starts to change, the looks to the Kabbalah start to be more favorable. And in the 20th century, we have Gershom Scholem, who's going to open a whole field for studying the Kabbalah. Such studies that nowadays reveal themselves as being a little limited, in some aspects.

Notably, Scholem was very textualist, not much phenomenological, that is, he didn't analyze much the phenomenon of the Kabbalah, be it in the ecstatic trance of the mystic, be it in the continuation of the obligations of a theurgical Kabbalist, Scholem did not conceive to analyze any of this.

And, beyond that, Scholem also didn't utilize other tools, as, for example, comparative studies with other mysticisms, also, he didn't utilize the tool of psychology and psychoanalysis that could've been favorable to what he was doing. Still, we have to look to the man with good eyes, too, he was beginning something.

And what about the panorama of the Kabbalistic studies in Brazil nowadays? Well, they crawl. But there is, despite that, great questions that are being asked in the Kabbalistic studies. I'll present some of them to you now, after this long "preamble" of mine.

A problem that would be the first (actually, this great introduction is the key component of this first problem), that is one of the greatest problems of the Jewish studies is an opposition between the academy and Kabbalah. You see, we'll study the Kabbalah from an academic point of view but, there are oppositions between academy and Kabbalah. A simple example is the case of *Zohar*, the most important book, maybe, of the Kabbalism, and the academics profoundly disagree with the traditional Jews, in imagining that this book was written by Moses de León, between the 13th and 14th centuries, whereas the traditional Jews think that this book is written by Simeon ben Yohai, of the 2nd century A.D., in other words, more than a thousand years before Moses de León.

That's not such an insignificant example, because the *Zohar* is held as one of the foundational works of the Kabbalism. Thus, assuming that a scholar of the Kabbalah (while phenomenon, history, or thought chain) approached the primary source, *Zohar*, and approached someone who read that primary source as a source for ecstatic trances, for example, this academic would have to do as an anthropologist would, that is, he would have to not judge the belief that that book is old, nor, on the other hand, judge the hypothesis that the book is as recent as the half of the Middle Ages. That's a crucial problem that shows the division between an academic interpretation of a Kabbalistic book and a Kabbalistic interpretation of a Kabbalistic book.

And that problem derives, precisely, from this need that's going to appear, beginning in the 19th century, with the Jewish studies, of affirming itself as an Enlightenment study, in the Enlightenment categories, that enlightens the history, for example, of the literature of the Jewish people, but from the strictly rational and secular categories, and then we already see the problem of the approach.

An alternative and interesting hypothesis, for the *Zohar* case, would be that there had been many authors, in various distinct times, and that there would be an oral transmission of a very ancient wisdom that begins to be compiled as early as the 2nd century A.D., and that has been compiled over the centuries. It's a reasonable hypothesis and it's interesting because it eliminates the *aporiae* of textology, caused by the analysis of the words that would indicate, on the one hand, that the book is recent or, on the other hand, that the book is old. It would be as recent as it is old. And it also eliminates this disjunction between Kabbalism according to Kabbalists and Kabbalism according to academics.

Another problem is the question of the endogeny or exogeny of the Kabbalah, that is, whether it's strictly a Jewish phenomenon or whether it's a Jewish phenomenon that appears before the influence of foreign literature. That is a huge problem because there are people who defend a total endogeny of the Kabbalah, that is, it emerges from a Jewish context, strictly, with categories that are completely Jewish and it stays this way throughout the centuries, closed in itself until nearly the Renaissance period.

The other hypothesis is the exogeny, which affirms that there is, for the formation of the Kabbalah, an influence that comes, for example, from the Gnostics. That's a hornet's nest.

A conciliatory position would be that both things are true: i.e. the Kabbalah is an endogenous phenomenon, traditionally, but because there is no isolated culture in the world – the case of Philo of Alexandria, which I mentioned earlier, exemplifies this, and we can base ourselves on the literature provided by Homi Bhabha – the cultures, when they interact, create a third thing, that is the intercultural intersectional space, but that is not the first nor the second culture.

Thus, for example, Philo of Alexandria is a third thing: he's neither Jew nor Greek, entirely. He's a Hellenistic Jew and a Greek Jew, he's Philo of Alexandria, his texts are a third cultural space of intersection. So, the Kabbalah would be representative of that, at some point.

Well, I had many more things to say about this, but I want to talk about Abraham Cohen de Herrera.

Abraham Cohen de Herrera is a very odd author, no one knows whether he's Portuguese, Spanish or Italian, before anything else. If you buy an Italian book about him, the book will say he's Italian; if you buy a book in Portuguese, it's going to say he's Portuguese; if you buy it in Spanish, it's going to say he's Spanish. Probably, he wrote in Italy and finished writing in the Netherlands, in the 17th

century. In short, his history is as follows: His name was Alonso Nuñez de Herrera and he probably was Portuguese, son of Jewish immigrants of the Diaspora, Spanish, that go to Lisbon, where he is born, baptized as Christian, Alonso Nuñez de Herrera.

After the Inquisition, in Portugal, his fathers move to the north of Italy, he moves to Morocco himself and lives as some sort of captain of the great Sultan of Morocco. And, one day, when he was captaining the market of the Sultan with the Iberic cities of the Mediterranean coast, Lord Essex, sent by the English Crown, captures Alonso Nuñez de Herrera, arrests the New Christians in a tower to the north of London and requests a rescue.

Lord Essex charges a rescue to the Spanish Crown and states something like: "look, Spanish Crown, I'm here with a bunch of New Christians, fled, citizens of Spain, and I want to sell them, so that you, as good Catholics, can apply an act of faith"...

Alonso Nuñez de Herrera, on this occasion, says he was not a subject of Spanish Crown, he affirmed being Tuscan, being, therefore, under the protection of the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the Duke of Siena, Fernando de Medici, who had published a daring edict of tolerance to the Jews and the heretic.

Of course, Ferdinando de Medici needed money because the Medici bank is going bankrupt, the Jews are being persecuted in the Iberian Peninsula, including very rich Jews that needed someplace to go, they needed a bank, and in Florence, for example, they would possibly deposit the money in the Medici bank.

Well, therefore, Alonso Nuñez de Herrera goes to Italy and when he arrives there, he came out as a Jew, once and for all, and adopts the name: Abraham Cohen de Herrera. Also, he starts, in there, to receive the influence of the Renaissance Platonism.

I'd said that there is a problem about the relation between exogeny and endogeny in the Kabbalism, that is, between the Kabbalism as something legitimately and only Jewish and possible external influence of the Pagan thought on Kabbalism, for example. This problem doesn't apply in the case of Abraham Cohen de Herrera, because, in fact, there is a heavy influence of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Stoicism and Skepticism on the work of Abraham Cohen de Herrera.

So, this methodological problem, here, in his case, doesn't even make a difference. That's why he's an interesting author; he transgresses these methodological frontiers that I've mentioned before: this one of the biases of the history of history of philosophy, for example, because he is, in fact, an important philosopher, influential on Isaac Aboab, Spinoza's teacher at the Pereira Yeshibah and that walked around Brazil, in Recife.

He also transgresses this frontier between endogeny and exogeny and transgresses a frontier which is this of the Kabbalah while academic discipline, or a mystic discipline, internal to Judaism, because he is an academic himself.

And another interesting thing in his work is that, another categorization that is done in the Kabbalah – a very traditional categorization that is done and that divides the Kabbalah between an ecstatic Kabbalah (in which the subject is passive before the Divine) and, in contrast, a theurgic Kabbalah (in which the subject is active before the Divine) – the case of Abraham Cohen de Herrera doesn't fit neither in one nor in another paradigm.

He's a strict theorist of the Kabbalah, in a context in which – and this interests me more than anything – the Kabbalah becomes a Jewish science to describe the whole cosmos. So, what we have from Abraham Cohen de Herrera is a description

of a theogony and of a cosmology that begins in the pure negation (that is a Neoplatonic inheritance), and that comes staggering ontological levels until it gets to the maximum level of ontological derivation, which is the present reality. But, in this pure negative void, there is an unmoved mover (which is an Aristotelian inheritance). Pure void and the unmoved mover. From this unmoved mover ten levels of reality are derived, which are the *Sefirot*.

Now, despite being mainly rational – and that is why I say he's a philosopher with some mystic aspect, not a philosophic mystic, but a mystic philosopher – despite that, there is mystic and theurgy present in him. Because it's a traditional topic, present, for example, in Moshe Cordovero, topic by which, through the study of the Kabbalah, it's reached a mystic or theurgic stage, through the study and by doing good deeds.

So, what Abraham Cohen de Herrera is doing is a systematization, an organization of the Kabbalah of Safed in the light of philosophical concepts that were passing over Florence at that time. Concepts, mainly, Neoplatonic and Aristotelian, though they came through a filter of a Humanistic tradition that begins with Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and other thinkers who are reading many things, not only Plato and Aristotle, they're reading Sextus Empiricus as well. They're reading the Stoics. They're reading the Greek-speaking Christians as well. This literature was almost totally lost in the West, it's only going to resurface with all its strength after the fall of Byzantium.

### 3 Conclusion

Summarizing, Abraham Cohen de Herrera transgresses all these binary paradigms that are methodological problems for studying the Kabbalah, for example, theurgy and mystic; rationalism and irrationalism. Another example: endogeny and exogeny... He transgresses all that. And he does so by making a book, *Puerta del Cielo*, which he writes in very odd Spanish, that is mixed up with Galego, Portuguese, Italian... He dies and leaves a sum of money for Isaac Aboab, asks him to translate the book to Hebrew. It takes Isaac Aboab many years to complete this translation because he comes to Brazil and maybe he's lectured this book here, in Recife.

The Kabbalah emerges, in the 17th century, as a descriptive science of the world, it aggregates knowledge, like Alchemy, for example; it aggregates philosophical concepts that were antagonistic before. For example, Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, are now summed; it aggregates political-theological questions of the time, because anyone who talks about God talks about nothing because God is unknowable. Thus, the Civil Wars of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counterreformation don't make any sense, for example. The diaspora of the Jews doesn't make any sense. Nobody is saying the truth about God.

All religious fundamentalism doesn't make any sense. Religiously, the position that would make the most sense to approach Man and God would be some sort of agnosticism, because the subject, in reading the book of Abraham Cohen, would get to a mystic state called, by the Greeks, *statis dianois* (present, for instance, in Sextus Empiricus), which is the paralysis of thought, the subject would stop thinking, and when he stops thinking, what happens? He elevates the reason to *Chokhmah*, which is the second *Sefira*, and then he's ready to do what is detailed by the metaphors, so recurring in the Kabbalism, making a move that is of the dripping in the ocean, his intellect unites with the Divine's own mind.



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